Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music

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Bo Diddley Bo Diddley have you heard
My pretty baby said she was a bird
—Bo Diddley

The power of music is in its participatory discrepancies, and these are basically of two kinds: processual and textural. Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be "out of time" and "out of tune."

For "participatory discrepancies" one could substitute "inflection," "articulation," "creative tensions," "relaxed dynamisms," "semiconscious or unconscious slightly out of syncnesses." For "process" one could substitute "beat," "drive," "groove," "swing," "push," etc., and for "texture" one could substitute "timbre," "sound," "tone qualities," "as arranged by," and so forth. The fact that these musical essentials are barely "figured" in Owen Barfield's sense (1965:24ff., 188) and certainly not "collectively represented" with any great clarity in language (1965: 41, 111, 122, 154–155) is evidence, I believe, of their original or active participatory power (1965:28–45). Put another way, wherever "lexical meanings" are various and ambiguous for a particular phenomenon, one can assume a lot of collective and individual unconsciousness and conversely a greater power for "speaker's meanings" (Barfield 1984) to define situations.

The syntactic or structural aspect of all music (Meyer 1965), but especially in thought-composed Western and other civilized musics, can create tensions, set up melodic/harmonic relationships that defer resolutions and gratifications and thereby involve the listener in the music. But isn't this involvement more analytic, sequential, conscious, rather than "participatory" in the sense described below? Even in these civilized musical systems, syntax does not invite the listener to participate in the phenomena with the same powers that process and texture have. It is really only in relatively recent historical periods of Western music that syntax and a peculiarly rationalist approach to it (Weber 1958) have managed to squeeze the mysteries of musical participation to the furthest corners of our awareness.

I am using the concept of "participation" as defined by Levy-Bruhl and refined by Owen Barfield. The paradigmatic citation from Levy-Bruhl:

> The Bororo (neighboring tribe) boast that they are red araras (parakeets). This does not merely signify that after their death they become araras, nor that araras are metamorphosed Bororos, and must be treated as such. It is something entirely different. "The Bororos," says Von den Steinen, who would not believe it, but finally had to give in to their explicit affirmations, "give one rigidly to understand that they are araras *at the present time,* just as if a caterpillar declared itself to be a butterfly." [Levy-Bruhl 1966:62]

And Barfield on participation:

> Participation begins by being an activity, and essentially a communal or social activity. It takes place in rites and initiation ceremonies resulting in [quoting Durkheim] "collective mental states of extreme emotional intensity, in which representation is as yet undifferentiated from the movements and actions which make the communion towards which it tends a reality to the group. Their participation is so effectively *lived* that it is not yet properly imagined."
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> This stage is not only pre-logical, but also pre-mythical. It is anterior to collective representations themselves, as I have been using the term. Thus, the first development Durkheim traces is from symbiosis or active participation (where the individual feels he is the totem) to collective representations of the totemic type (where the individual feels that his ancestors were the totem, that he will be when he dies, etc.). From this symbolic apprehension he then arrives at the duality, with which we are more familiar, of ideas on the one hand and numinous religion on the other. [1965:32]

All humans were participants once upon a time, but I believe we still experience much music and perhaps some other portions of reality this way. I also believe we need more of this participatory consciousness if we are to get back into ecological synchrony with ourselves and with the natural world. At the very least, it is important to recognize this capacity in human beings to defy logic, to defy the so-called laws of contradiction, and to insist upon identity, to insist upon participation. We are all Bororos! We are all Araras! If you can participate once, in one song, dance, poem, rite, you can do it more times and in more ways until you are "at one" with the entire universe, or some very large chunks of it. The social moments where I get these "oneness" and "urge-to-merge" feelings most forcefully are when I'm dancing at polka parties, or salsa parties, or swept up in a black church service, or when making music. Trying to conceptualize or explain these euphoric feelings of "polka happiness" or "blues mellowness," a theory and rhetoric of participation helps keep the good feelings alive. Positivism and Marxism (with its language of negation, contradiction, alienation, commodification, reification, mediation, etc.) tend to reify our problems still further, as they name and describe them, whereas the language of participation offers hope.

Participation is the opposite of alienation from nature, from society, from the body, from labor, and is therefore worth holding onto wherever we can still find some of it, the two exceptions to this rule being those large-scale nation-state organizations with aggressive purposes where participation becomes the very essence of fascism, and those participations fueled by fear and desperation where cargo-cult beliefs can and often do have disastrous consequences.[1] The rites of fascist participation are easily recognized (and presumably avoided) because they

are large-scale and heighten the four inequalities: society over nature; society over other societies; men over women; men over men. As the ecocatastrophe and economic crises deepen, however, it may be harder and extremely more important to distinguish between participations that really revitalize, equalize, and decentralize as opposed to those that promise the four equalities in the future if followers will only make sacrifices now.

Discrepant is as good a term as I've been able to find for the phenomena that make music a peculiarly powerful vehicle for participatory consciousness and action: "not consistent or matching; disagreeing . . . from Latin . . . *discrepare,* to sound different, vary; *dis-* apart plus *crepare,* to rattle, sound" (American Heritage Dictionary 1969). It is the little discrepancies within a jazz drummer's beat, between bass and drums, between rhythm section and soloists, that create "swing" and invite us to participate. These processual kinds of participatory discrepancies were given a preliminary description 20 years ago in "Motion and Feeling through Music" (Keil 1966a).

More recent explorations of the "push" or dynamism in Polish-American polka music reveal similar sorts of discrepancies drawing people to the music, onto the dance floor, into the festival. Here are Ed Benbennik and Chester "Hoot" Filipiak describing Marion Lush's great band of the 1960s:

> As Ed put it, "Marion has always been hell on drummers; he knew what he wanted, the sound he wanted, and that's what he got. It was a relaxed, dynamic sound. Playing with other bands can be a lot of work, but with Marion it just flows along." Or in Hoot's phrasing of the same paradox, "The most important thing in a good polka band is relaxation, to push it hard in a relaxed mood. If the trumpets are playing tense, it can affect the whole band, and if anyone in the band is tense, the dancers can actually feel this on the floor. Lush's band was always relaxed. It was an unspoken thing."
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> Speaking of the unspoken, I'll never forget Hoot bringing his drumsticks to the phone to beat out a comparison between "Jeep" Machinya's snare drum rhythms and Lil' Wally's in hopes that a Buffalonian could grasp the subtleties of some essential Chicago grooves despite the great distance. As we talked about the beat of each drummer, the differences between Hoot's beat and Jeep's and where Rudy Sienkowski's way with a snare drum might fit, it became clear that every polka drummer of any reputation, every band with any loyal following, has a unique "beat."
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> Trying to talk about polka rhythm sections overall, and Lush's "million dollar rhythm section" in particular, Hoot pointed out that the articulation of the bass line has also been a crucial variable in defining "beat" and style and sense of tempo. The amplified bass from a concertina dictates a "slower," looser pace and feeling than the bass from the accordion or the still "quicker" bass from a chordovox. The old combination of string bass and piano working together creates still another "time feel." [Blau, Keil, and Keil; unpublished MS]

Following Filipiak (which really could be a thesis-length extension of one phone conversation), the idiosyncratic processual discrepancies within a given polka drummer's snare drum beat, between that beat and any one of five different bass sources, also presumably shaped by a personal touch, create "push" or "relaxed dynamism" that can be enhanced or hindered by the absence or presence of

tension in the trumpet section. This seems so similar to the jazz processes described in "Motion and Feeling through Music" (Keil 1966a) that the reader might wonder about my subjective biases and whether or not the Polish-American processes are a result of diffusion from Afro-America. Time and future research will tell, but I think "swing" or "push" is present to varying degrees in all musics and that old Polish "grooves" were simply enhanced by any Afro-American vibes picked up in the New World. Nick Timko's brilliant analysis (personal communication) of the ways in which the crisp and loose articulations (participatory discrepancies) of Eastern and Chicago styles respectively are falsely perceived by dancers as primarily differences of tempo ("Eastern is faster than Chicago," say a lot of people) opened my ears ten years ago to the range and complexity of polka processes; there is no reason to believe that things were any simpler in ages past; probably quite the contrary.

Certainly the textural or timbrel participatory discrepancies tend to be wilder and crazier the further back and further out one listens. Or is it the further up? I'm thinking of all the pitch discrepancies in mountain musics all over the world: Tibet, Appalachia, Epirus, the Tatras. The driving dissonances of Goral singing and string playing are gradually "toned down" in the New World. Degrees of "out-of-tuneness" (vis-à-vis Western bourgeois conventions) are noticeable in the basses of Polish-American polka bands, but textural discrepancies in the higher frequencies are subtle and not obviously celebrated as in Goral singing and fiddling. (Could we trace textural losses and processual gains in the urbanization of various traditional musics around the world?) The two-trumpet sound developed by Marion Lush and now utilized by most polka bands (even a quartet like the Bay State Four has two trumpets, accordion, and drums) is powerful, I believe, because the blended harmonics of two trumpets guarantee textural participatory discrepancies, a certain bright and happy sound that invites people to get up and dance. Paired alto saxophones in Papago-Pima polka bands have a similar effect. The paired instruments of Tibetan monastery ensembles are perhaps the paradigmatic instance of pitches juxtaposed or rubbed against each other to maximize the intensity of matter, spirit, and energy coming together. As with process, every live or genuine music has varying kinds of textural discrepancies, and measuring the degrees of these is uncharted territory. Within the jazz community there has been lots of informal discussion about the out-of-tune "edge" to the "tone" of players x, y and z, or the "sound" of groups a, b and c. Similar talk exists in the polka world and probably within every musical community. What do the best piano tuners do when they want more brightness from each three-stringed note? How are the tubes of an organ made to resonate well?

But rather than multiply textural examples, perhaps this is a good place to outline how an alternative musicology of participatory discrepancies might proceed. Some broad Notes and Queries:

1. *Listen and look for participatory discrepancies in the process and texture of a music and in its wider contexts.* I suggest the analyst look as well as listen, because the physical motions of music makers give important information, and

the behavioral responses of people (for example, dancing) are the bridge to the whole audiovisual space-time tropes of a culture (Armstrong 1971; Keil 1979). The best Chicago-style polka dancers are consistently way out of sync with the music, to my eyes at least; and if so, what is this discrepancy about? Similarly, in Cuba recently, it seemed to me that the best dancers were consistently "between the beats" in their footwork, providing a hermeneutic or between-the-lines interpretation of drumming patterns that were certainly complicated enough before the dancers added their moves to the mix.

2. *Discuss all possible participatory discrepancies with the experts.* Some practitioners may also be organic intellectuals, like Nick Timko and Chester Filipiak, with clear theories about what is happening in their music. In any case, check out the best musicians and dancers ethnographically. What do they say they are doing? Where do they think the magic of participation is coming from? How do they "figure" and individually or collectively represent any possible discrepancies?

3. *How do #1 and #2, your perceptions, and expert perceptions match up?*

4. *What laboratory measurements are possible to further confirm good matchups between #1 and #2 or shed light on areas of disagreement?* Can we wire up the contact points on fingers and drumsticks? Can we graph very precisely the acoustical phenomena and measure the actual discrepancies in time and pitch? Within jazz and polka rhythm sections alone there are thousands of experiments to try that would combine expert perceptions and lab measurements in various ways to more tightly specify kinds and degrees of "swing" or "push." Confident that these participatory mysteries will never be more fully resolved than the mysteries of small particle physics or the furthest reaches of the universe, I'm ready to call in the engineers and start exploring.

5. *What does the rest of the culture "figure" and "collectively represent" to be going on in their music? How are the mysteries of participation kept mysterious?*

Having read this far, you are now aware that the best music must be full of discrepancies, both "out of time" and "out of tune." What was keeping you from this perception before? How did your soul get so fretted, bored, and well-tempered? One can tease about the very peculiar Western biases that have kept us from a liberating musicology for so long, but I suspect that every culture has its own blinders that protect the participatory discrepancies and keep them as fully mysterious and as fully participatory as possible. Maybe that's why I didn't call in the engineers to finish the refutation of Meyer's theories in 1966.

Commenting on my criticism back in that year, Professor Meyer argued that "swing" must be a matter of microsyntax. The tiny hesitations and anticipations could be noted and their contributions to the deferred gratifications of value and greatness in music assessed. I would like to turn this notion around and suggest that musical syntax may just be macroprocess and macrotexture, or when written down, a petrified skeleton on which to hang the flesh and blood of actual music-making.

One of the great works of 20th-century music, "Bo Diddley," by the composer of the same name, is based upon "ham-boning" rhythms that probably derive from the period when slaves without instruments used their bodies as drums. Placed in creative tension with the mechanical vibrato or tremolo of an electric guitar, these rhythms ushered in the era booming today out of boom boxes and disco-systems everywhere, the era of mechanical participatory discrepancies. In "Bo Diddley" the mechanical guitar vibrato is not just a textural surface feature but the core of the process and shaper of structure as well.

Talking to Bo backstage at the Tralfamadore Cafe (Buffalo 12/31/85) I asked about the famous beat. The expert rejected both of my perceptions. On the hambone rhythm hypothesis Bo recited the traditional lyric, demonstrated the body drumming licks, and compared them to his own beat onomatopoeically, only to insist in the face of their obvious (to me) similarity that "the only thing that makes that sound like it could be related to Bo Diddley's beat is the structure of the words. Hambone, hambone, have you heard (you see); Papa's gonna buy me a mocking bird (see). If you took off 'bird' it would change the rhythm set, you dig?" He demonstrated the hambone and Bo Diddley beats again for emphasis and said, "2000 miles difference!" This dialogue continued:

> CK: And that mechanical guitar vibrato on that original song (I imitate the pulsed drag triplets)—that transforms it completely!
>
> BD: No. That has nothing to do with it. That's just something, a mechanical device that they made the armature of a tremolo and I used it. I don't know if that made the difference in the song, if it made the difference in rhythm pattern of the song or what. It could have made the difference, to have the notes being wobbly like that. I call it wobbly. 'Cause guys have copied the thing and they didn't have no tremolo and they made it with it being straight. . . . Straight guitar licks. So I can't say what made it, but it's not hambone, it's not related, it's the word structure. . . . It's not the same thing.
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> CK: But that wobble? When I was just listening to the record before I came down here, I said, I want to find out, if I can, what's behind that.
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> BD: [Sings the wobbly sound emphatically]
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> CK: It's in sync with the rhythm. It's in triplets against that [singing the Diddley beat].
>
> BD: It took me about 3 or 4 years to . . . ah . . .
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> CK: . . . sync it up!
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> BD: No, not to sync it up, it's to learn to sing *with that*. Because it's an offset beat. I call it offset. It ain't directly right on. You see there's a trick to that whole song, and I'll tell you what it is. See, I wanted to be a drummer at one time. And what I'm doing on the guitar is what I expected to do on drums.
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> CK: So drumming is the basis of that guitar style?
>
> BD: Yeah, with me. Because you got to have a certain thing going on in your head in order to execute this.

I think Ellas McDaniel (Bo Diddley) is completely honest in his responses but also protecting his participatory discrepancies in this interview. We are prob-

ably both "right" about the Bo Diddley beat and simply sorting out semantic differences, trying to negotiate the names for an elusive reality, names that can only begin to describe its uniqueness and its universality. Here's another writer's effort to describe it:

> Bo's beat is there, fully realized; he sets it with his guitar, and maracas and drums played like congas are its underpinning. That beat has often been described as "shave and a hair cut, two bits," the joke rhythm you beep on your car horn at the drive-in. Nothing is further from the truth. Bo's beat is his own pulse made art. More than a signature, it is his ultimate statement, the stable matrix from which his music flows.
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> Yet the beat, four-quarter time shoved off center like the beat kept by the claves in West Indian music, is complex and changing. Bo can syncopate it any way he wants to. His physical strength makes it profoundly sensual, and the maracas evoke Africa or Haitian. The beat is dense, but its ambiguity of shadings opens it up and keeps it moving. It is the Bo Diddley beat: "Everybody from New Orleans," Louis Armstrong once said, "got that thing." [Lydon 1974:65]

Jelly Roll Morton called it "the Spanish tinge," a universal or at least circum-Atlantic groove, but as particular as Bo Diddley at any given moment on any given night. His recent performance in Buffalo found him shading his "beat" and "sound" from song to song with varying degrees of success in terms of getting the backup band into the groove and the dancers moving happily. Each "statement" is the ultimate or last. The matrix is not stable. "The Bo Diddley Beat" takes a slightly or markedly different form each time out. In this music, at least, the process and texture are tightly meshed and dictating whatever syntax there will be.

Moreover, these transformations of the Diddley beat seem to be a perfect analogy in the area of "swinger's feeling" to what Barfield calls "speaker's meaning" in the field of historical semantics:

> It is a historical fact that those elusive norms we loosely call "meanings" are involved in a constant process of change. It would moreover not be very difficult to demonstrate that all mental progress (and, arising from that, all material progress) is brought about in association with those very changes. One can go further and say that the changes are made possible precisely by that discrepancy between an individual speaker's meaning and the current, or lexical, meaning. [Barfield 1984:30–31]

I am uneasy about the notion of "progress" in Barfield's description; even "development" suggests that our "meanings" and "feelings" are somehow improving over time (when in fact they may only be continually improvised!). The crucial point of agreement, however, is that whatever historical change in language, music, dance, or culture is about, we can study it best, at its very point of creation, if we attend very closely to the discrepancies that enhance participation and the contexts that generate these discrepancies.

I will stop here at the beginning of what could be a shelf of books about music in the era of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1969:220–225). What has happened since Les Paul and Mary Ford put the echo effect into "How High the

Moon'' and Bo Diddley learned to sing with a separate little magnatone tremolo box of bubbling mercury is a lot! It is ridiculous, in some ways, to be thinking about a liberatory musicology or a revolution in musicology when the techno-electrical applications of any theory I might invent have been going on at an accelerating pace for 30 years; when the synthesizers, drum machines, dubbers, scratchers, hip-hoppers, and mass producers have already technologized participatory discrepancies, have already discovered the degrees of space, echo, reverb, digital delay, double-tracking, semisyncedness, and the like that will make millions buy and move, move and buy; when the engineers have already arrived in force and taken control of the central dance sector in on-going Afro-American music; when ''this non-machine tradition'' (Bennett 1964:53; Keil 1966b:175) has been almost totally mechanized down to the degrees of density in the synthetic ''soul clap''; when the revolution in the music is long over, the barricades set up, danced upon, taken down, and repacked for shipment abroad.

As usual, there's nothing bold or new for us academics to do; we just have to get down to the recording studio or dance floor and ask people about what has been happening.

Notes

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[1]The negative aspects of participatory consciousness are given fuller description here thanks to Robert Dentan's critical reading of an earlier version of this article.

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